

# Reaper's Fire

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## Tinker

It was almost seven that evening when I felt the AC kick back on. I'd been lying on my back on the (relatively) cool tile floor behind the counter, staring up at the pressed-tin ceiling and trying to remember why I hadn't already moved back to Seattle.

In Seattle it rained.

Cool breezes blew off the bay and the lush greenery covered everything with its shaded canopy. People didn't really need air-conditioning, but if they happened to have it and it broke, there were lots of repair men available.

Of course, Seattle also had Brandon. Not only that, my dad didn't want to move, and I'd come to realize I couldn't leave him here alone. It wasn't safe for him, not since Mom died.

Ugh.

At least the AC was working again, blowing down from the ceiling vent across my sweaty body, reminding me that while the world might not be crawling with perfect men, at least there were still a few useful ones running around. Cooper Romero was a keeper, and it had nothing to do with how sexy he was . . . although the fact that he was sex on a stick—make that sex *with* a stick—didn't exactly diminish his appeal.

When I'd dragged him up to the black tar roof to show him the ancient AC, I'd expected him to make a run for it. Any sensible man would. Instead, he'd spent the whole afternoon busting his ass to save my chocolates—*Oh God, I wish that were code for something more exciting*—officially qualifying him as a superhero in my book.

As for me, there wasn't much I could do once I got all the sweets safely downstairs into the basement. There weren't any customers walking in off the street, and seeing as I couldn't make or ship candy in a 102-degree shop, I'd alternated between attempting to read a book, looking over orders I couldn't fulfill on my laptop, and bringing Cooper glasses of iced tea. I'd been nervous around him at first, but you can only stay nervous for so long when you're sweating like a pig—there's a certain freedom in knowing you look like hell and there's no saving your hair.

I'd thrown my arm across my eyes in a pathetic attempt to block out reality toward the end.

When cold air started flowing into the room, I could've cried with relief. He'd never had a chance to fill out the application form, and I'd long since decided it didn't matter. Unless he was an ax murderer, I'd give him the apartment and the job.

Might give it to him even if he was, to be honest.

"It's working again," Cooper announced, and I jerked, startled. Shit, had I fallen asleep? Opening my eyes, I looked up to find him standing over me. Dear God in heaven—that was one hell of a bare chest.

Holy. Shit.

I'd taken note of his build when he first walked in the shop, but everything under his shirt had been theoretical. Now there was six-foot-plus of raw sex appeal right there, all sweaty and sculpted and . . . well, let's just say I'd be stopping off on the way home to pick up some fresh batteries.

That's when the situation hit me—Cooper Romero was the hottest man I'd met in forever, and he'd just found me lying on the floor in my own sweat and filth like a dog. Typical luck. I scrambled to my feet, pretending I wasn't totally embarrassed (I was) and not in the least bit freaked out by how unspeakably attractive this guy was. Okay, "attractive" wasn't quite the right word, because it implied a certain level of polish and class that just didn't fit Cooper at all.

Brandon was *attractive*.

Cooper?

I'd lick him all over and massage his butt if he asked. He stared down at me, his eyes carefully blank, making it very clear he wasn't asking. *Story of my fucking life*. Sitting up, I pushed myself to my feet without bothering to dust off. Lost cause at this point.

"Not sure how much life the AC has left," he said slowly. "I managed to get it going, but fixing it right would cost more than it's worth and then some."

Of course it would.

"I just need to get through the summer," I told him, wiping a finger under my eye. My perfectly applied, vintage-style makeup had melted, leaving me with a clown face. Fortunately I'd (mostly) given up on caring three hours ago, right around the time I'd discovered the floor tiles were cooler than the rest of the room. "After that, I'll worry about the furnace and by next summer I might not even be here anymore."

“Really?” he asked, cocking a brow. “You selling out?”

“Not sure,” I told him. “I’m not thinking that far ahead right now. Things are very iffy with my dad . . . I think he’s got some—”

No. I couldn’t say it. Saying it out loud made it too real, plus the last thing I needed were a bunch of rumors flying around town. So far we’d kept dad’s situation mostly to family and friends.

“Tinker?”

Shaking myself, I smiled at him. “Thank you so much for fixing that. I’m not even sure what I would’ve done—I can’t afford to miss a week’s worth of orders. Not only would it put me behind, it would burn my customers.”

He nodded, studying me thoughtfully. God, he really was beautiful . . . Nothing like Brandon’s polished sophistication. No, Cooper gave off more of a warrior-tossing-you-over-his-fearless-steed kind of vibe. Yeah, like that would end well, because my track record with men was so fucking perfect, right?

*Pull your head out of the gutter. He probably has a girlfriend.*

At least I could finally lock up this hellhole of a shop and get a shower.

“Thank you so much—you have no idea how much I appreciate it.”

“No, but the whole throwing yourself at my feet thing was a subtle hint,” he said, and I realized he was teasing me. Was he flirting? I couldn’t decide if that kicked ass or scared the shit out of me.

“Anyway, it’s getting late,” I told him, feeling suddenly awkward. “I’m going to grab some dinner down the street, and then I could take you over and show you the apartment.”

A small, knowing smile crossed his face, and I realized he thought I was hitting on him.

“No,” I said quickly, mortified. “I wasn’t asking you out. Omigod, this is weird.”

“What, you aren’t turned on by a man who smells like old socks?” he asked lightly, raising his arm and giving a sniff. He was joking, but the sweat wasn’t a turnoff. Nope. Not even a little bit. “If that’s not enough for you, the roof tar on my ass should be a big attraction.”

Closing my eyes, I bit back a groan. He started laughing. Not in a cruel way, but companionably, which I guess made sense because both of us were disgusting as hell. Of course, now I wanted to check out his ass, but I managed to keep my eyes on target (mostly) when I answered him.

“Well, it’s sexy but I’ll manage to control myself somehow. I do want to grab dinner, though, and we need to figure out the apartment details.”

“I’ll take the place, doesn’t matter what it is,” he replied. “I’m in a hotel and it’s getting old. I’d love to move in on Sunday, but I can’t go look at it right now—gotta get my ass cleaned up. Meeting up with someone later.”

Of course he was, because men who looked like Cooper didn’t spend Friday nights alone.

“Sounds great,” I told him, refusing to show any disappointment. “Just text me when you’re ready, and I’ll get you the key.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but a sudden pounding against the locked shop door caught us both off guard. I spun around to find Talia Jackson glaring at me through the glass. Talia and three of her skankier friends, including Sadie Baxter, a girl I used to babysit when I was in college.

A girl who was now twenty.

Damn.

“Cooper!” Talia shouted. “What the fuck are you doing?”

I glanced at my new handyman, startled. Talia Jackson and her brother, Marsh, were two of the nastiest people I’d ever met. Marsh was president of the local motorcycle gang, a group called the Nighthawk Raiders motorcycle club. The club had been around most of my life, but it was only in recent years that they’d turned really bad. I mean, they were never the kinder, gentler sort of bikers, but I’d never been actively afraid when I’d heard a motorcycle, either.

Now? Let’s just say we’d all gotten a little edgy.

“That’s my girl,” Cooper said, and something deep down inside of me died a little. Of course he’d go for someone like Talia. She might have the heart of a deranged circus clown—you know, the kind that survives by eating the souls of innocent children—but she was hot.

Really hot.

Not only that, she was slutty, and while I wasn’t into the whole slut-shaming thing (like I had room to judge after the bachelorette party debacle . . . ugh), I wasn’t naive enough to think he was attracted to her personality. Cooper Romero might have a sweet smile, and he’d fixed my AC, but now I had proof positive that he’d never be into a girl like me.

Specifically, a grown-up with curves.

All righty, then. Probably for the best anyway.

“Just a sec!” I called to her, determined to take the high road, then I grabbed my keys so I could open the door. She pushed inside with her posse, and I do mean *pushed*. Little bitch shoved me so hard I nearly knocked over the display of antique Russian teacups my mother had lovingly collected. (So far as I knew, she’d never sold a single one of them, but it’d made her happy.)

“Careful,” I warned, and Talia turned on me.

“What did you just say to me?”

“Babe, let’s talk,” Cooper said, catching her arm and pulling her into his body. She squealed, going from aggressive to flirty in an instant.

“You’re all sweaty. It’s *sooo* disgusting.”

I noted she wasn’t trying to get away. Cooper smiled down at her, a hint of something feral in his eyes. Yeah, okay—whatever smile he’d been giving me, it hadn’t held any of that kind of intensity.

Yours truly was officially chopped liver.

“I was just about to head out and grab a shower,” he told her. “Wanna come with me?”

She pouted. “I can’t. The girls and I need to get fixed up. I’ll see you at the bar, though, right?”

He looked down at her, offering a sexy, indulgent smile. “Can’t wait.”

“Perfect,” she said, reaching around to grab his ass for a quick squeeze. Then she turned and strutted back out without a word to me, her gaggle of girls following like well-trained geese. Sadie gave a little finger wave on the way. The door closed behind them with a cheerful little jingle, and I wondered why the hell I even bothered with Hallies Falls.

I missed Seattle.

So what if it had Brandon? I could drown him in Lake Washington. Problem solved.

“Sorry about that—Talia is a little high-strung,” Cooper said.

“Oh, I know all about her,” I replied, hoping I didn’t sound as catty as I felt. Cooper didn’t seem to notice.

“I’m new to town, but she’s been showing me around,” Cooper continued, stepping over to stand in front of me, hands shoved deep in his front pockets. “I should get going.”

“Of course—don’t let me keep you. What time do you think you’ll be in touch tomorrow?”

“Afternoon work?”

“No problem. Looking forward to hearing from you.”

He nodded and pushed through the door, walking down the street without a second look back. I locked up behind him, wondering why all the hottest guys were douchebags. Not that Cooper had acted like a douche, but he had to be my age or older—late thirties—and Talia was the same age as Sadie. She was also a raging bitch. There was only one reason a man like him would date a girl like that, and it had nothing to do with personality or character.

Cooper Romero might be beautiful, but obviously he was shallow. Suppose it was too much to hope for a man who could fix an air conditioner and have a soul at the same time.

Pity.

Reaper's Fire will be available Aug. 9, 2016

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